

Field Report

Pompeys Pillar National Historic Landmark

■ **1.0 Summary**

Pompeys Pillar National Historic Landmark is located in a major tourism corridor approximately 30 miles east of Billings, Montana. Pompeys Pillar is the only site on the Lewis and Clark Trail where the public can view physical evidence of the Lewis and Clark Expedition: on July 25, 1806, Captain William Clark carved his name and the date in the sandstone pillar. Current visitation to the site is approximately 50,000 visitors annually, the majority of whom are people on pass-through visits on the way to other destinations such as Yellowstone National Park. Visitation is expected to increase with the upcoming 200th anniversary of the Lewis and Clark expedition but, according to BLM staff, the need for Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) does not exist other than to develop a better trails system.

■ **2.0 Background Information**

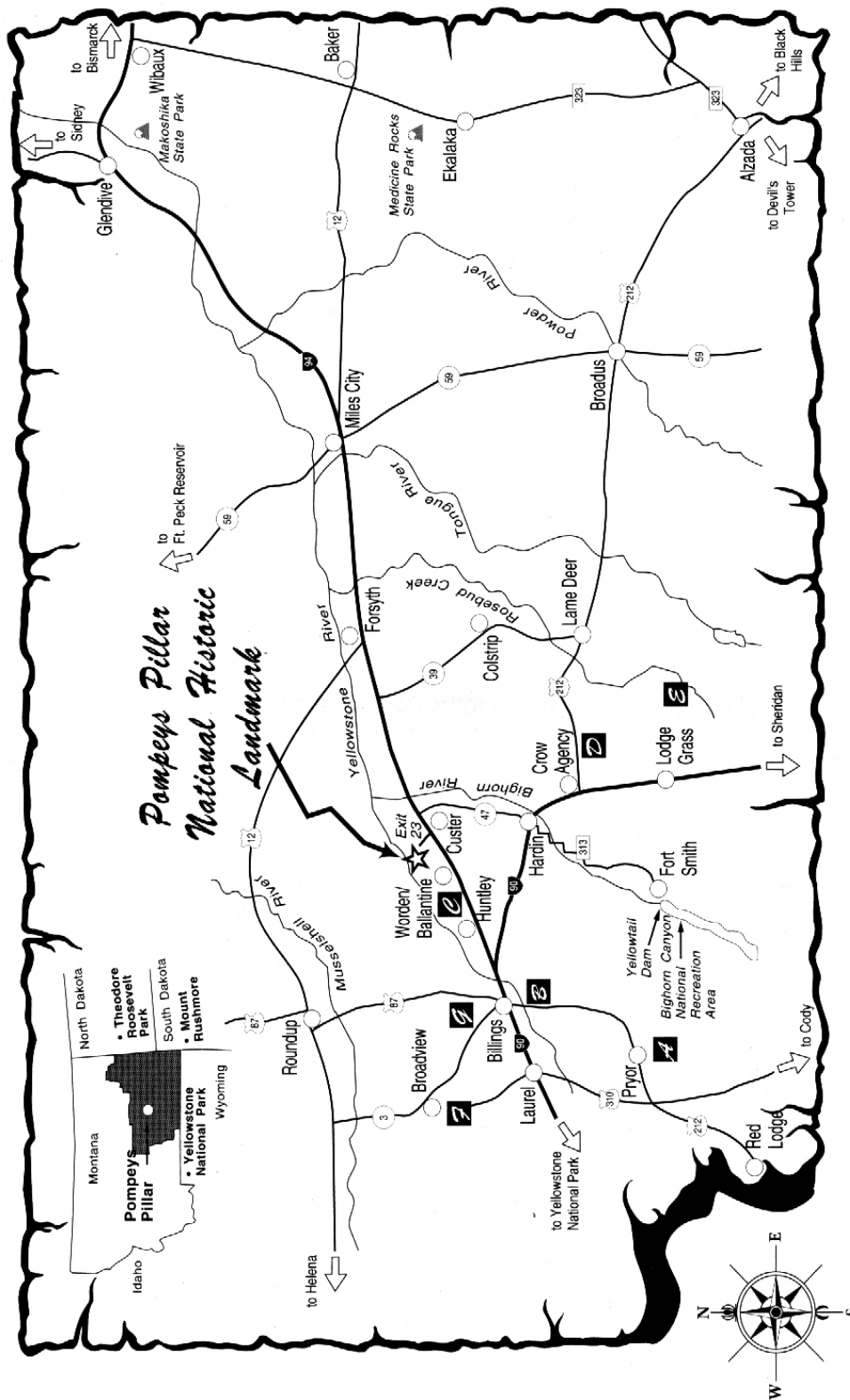
2.1 Location

Pompeys Pillar National Historic Landmark is a large sandstone outcrop where Captain Clark carved his name and date in the rock. The site, located along the Yellowstone River approximately 30 miles east of Billings, Montana, is adjacent to Interstate 94 and bound by the Yellowstone River on the north, Montana State Highway 312 on the south, and private farms on the east and west (see Figure 1).

2.2 Administration and Classification

On July 23, 1965, Pompeys Pillar was officially designated a National Historic Landmark, identifying the site as having a historic resource of national significance. This designation identifies the Pompeys Pillar landform itself, including the six acres above the 2,890-foot contour. In 1983, the same six-acre site was listed on the National Registry of Historic Places as a significant cultural property. In 1991, the BLM acquired 366 acres, including the pillar itself, from the Foote family and reopened the pillar to the public in 1992. Previously, the site had been operated privately from 1955 to 1989. Two hundred acres of the site are managed under a cooperative wildlife management program with the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks.

Figure 1. Regional Location Map Physical Description



2.3 Physical Description

Pompeys Pillar is an isolated block of light yellow sandstone on the south bank of the Yellowstone River (see Figure 2). The pillar rises more than 100 feet almost vertically. The BLM constructed a wooden staircase to provide safe public access to Clarke's signature, as well as to protect the resource and reduce erosion. There are two interpretive waysides along the hike up to Pompeys Pillar. In 1992, a visitor contact station (approximately 840-square feet) was constructed with about 75 percent of the structure set aside as an open room for displays and greeting visitors. A 30-vehicle gravel parking lot, located adjacent to the visitor contact station, and two concrete vault toilets with concrete walkways were also installed. These facilities, built as temporary structures, were to be modified or relocated when activity planning was completed.

Figure 2. Pompeys Pillar



The remainder of the Pompeys Pillar site is flat with a portion of it located in the 100-year floodplain. During high-water times, this part of the site is inundated. Farming occurs on about 200 acres of the site under a Sikes Act Agreement, by which the BLM allows an individual to farm the land for profit. Cottonwood, willow, Russian olive, and buffalo-berry dominate unfarmed areas, all of which are typical vegetation found in floodplain and riparian areas.

2.4 Mission and Goals of the National Monument

The mission and goals of Pompeys Pillar are to help visitors appreciate the cultural and historic significance of Pompeys Pillar and the natural beauty of the site, while protecting the cultural resource and providing a unique recreational experience. The mission and goal of the BLM is also to utilize the facility in a safe and responsible manner and promote multiple use of the site.

2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile

Visitation in 1999 was down approximately 30 percent with just over 40,200 visitors compared to nearly 57,600 visitors in 1998. In previous years, the Pillar has experienced slight increases in visitation as seen from 1996 with 42,500 to 1997 with 48,000. A sample survey conducted in 1993 and 1994 of 450 visitors identified four general origins of visitors to the site:

- 8.3 percent were local Yellowstone and Carbon County visitors;
- 28 percent were from Montana (excluding Yellowstone and Carbon County visitors);
- 83 percent were from the United States (excluding Montana visitors); and
- 1.0 percent of visitors were from outside of the United States.

Most respondents to the 1993-1994 survey had not planned to stop at Pompeys Pillar, but had responded to highway signs while on their way to visit Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument and Yellowstone National Park. The average length of stay at Pompeys Pillar is estimated to be less than one hour.

■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns

3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Pompeys Pillar is located in a major tourism corridor, with convenient access from Interstate 94 a tremendous asset. Additionally, State Highway 312 connects all the way to Billings, providing an alternative travel route to the interstate. This highway is being considered for designation as a scenic highway and provides alternative modes of travel, such as bicycles, access to the site. Visitation to the site typically occurs by passenger vehicles, trucks, and vans, although the site does receive some tour bus and large truck traffic.

The current transportation facilities at Pompeys Pillar are a gravel access road, gravel parking lot, and concrete and dirt walking trails. Future plans include relocating the access drive and parking lot with the construction of the proposed visitor center (see Figure 3). The plan calls for paving the facilities at that time.

Figure 3. Parking Lot Construction



3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues and Concerns

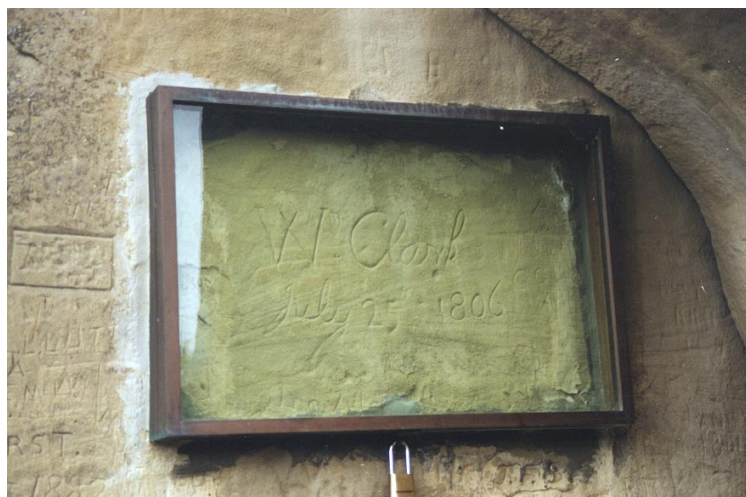
The community closest to the National Historic Landmark is the Town of Pompeys Pillar, which has a population of approximately 200. Other nearby towns include Warden, Huntley, and Ballentine. The largest community in the vicinity is Billings. The Billings Chamber of Commerce is very supportive of efforts to increase visitation to the pillar.

One community activity related to the pillar is Clark Day, a festival day held on the Sunday closest to the date of the signature. On this occasion, the BLM provides free admission to Pompeys Pillar for various activities. Other associated local activities include a canoe float on the Yellowstone River.

3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns

A number of significant historic features are present at Pompeys Pillar including Clark's 1806 signature (see Figure 4), Native American pictographs and petroglyphs, and the signatures and markings of trappers, Yellowstone River steamboat men, frontier army troops, railroaders, missionaries, cattlemen, homesteaders, and others from the 19th and early 20th centuries. Visitors who climb the pillar via the stairs are given a glimpse back in time.

Figure 4. Clark’s “signature” on the face of the Pillar



The current natural resources of the Yellowstone River floodplain and riparian area are similar to those which early explorers would have experienced. The area supports a variety of wildlife including mule and whitetail deer, turkey, raccoon, fox, coyote, and an occasional bobcat and mountain lion. Numerous upland game birds and waterfowl are also present on site. USFWS has identified four threatened and endangered species that may exist in the area: the bald eagle, the peregrine falcon, the black-footed ferret, and the pallid sturgeon. Of these species, the only one currently known to inhabit the area is the bald eagle.

3.4 Recreation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Recreational activities occurring on the site include environmental education classes, picnicking, wildlife viewing and bird watching, deer and upland game bird hunting, and fishing. The Yellowstone River offers other recreational activities including floating and fishing; however, use of the river is limited by a limited number of access points. The closest developed boat launch is located about nine river miles above Pompeys Pillar, while the nearest downstream boat launch is about 15 river miles below.

3.5 Tribal Considerations

Pompeys Pillar is within the territory historically acknowledged as homeland of the Apsaalooke, or Crow, Indians. The pillar’s name in the Crow language is variously translated as “Where the mountain lion lies,” “The mountain lion’s lodge,” or “Where the mountain lion preys.” The strategic location of the pillar at an important ford of the Yellowstone River and its prominent appearance made it a landmark for Northern Plains Indians. Ethnographic and archeological evidence suggests the pillar was a place of ritual and religious activity. For example, aboriginal rock art can still be seen on the pillar today and there were certainly sweat lodges built in the vicinity during the 19th century. Further evidence suggests that ritual burials may have been placed at the pillar as well.

■ 4.0 Planning and Coordination

4.1 Unit Plans

Pompeys Pillar National Historic Landmark has an Activity Plan that describes the physical characteristics of the site, management objectives and constraints, and management actions for the site. Subsequent plans include an Environmental Assessment/Amendment for the Billings Resource Management Plan prepared in 1996, an Interpretive Prospectus prepared in July 1998, and draft Program and Conceptual Design Alternatives for a new visitor center prepared in August 1998.

4.2 Public and Agency Coordination

The BLM is currently investigating alternatives for a new visitor center on the site with a committee established to guide the long-range planning effort. The plan outlines development in three phases: protection during the planning phase and the start of interpretive programs, the planning and design of the new visitor center, and the construction phase. Numerous partnerships with interest in the activities of the monument have been established, including one between the Pompeys Pillar Interpretive Association and Billings Chamber of Commerce.

■ 5.0 Assessment of Need and System Options

5.1 Magnitude of Need

BLM staff defines ATS for Pompeys Pillar as biking trails and routes and hiking trails. Current visitation is expected to increase with the approaching 200th anniversary of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, but is not expected to be of a magnitude that would require an ATS.

Alternative transportation on the site, i.e., trails for access, is likely to be affected by the floodplain. The location of the proposed visitor center, parking area and access road will have an impact on the floodplain. Incorporating trails that respect the natural environment but allow for visitor use without being inundated with water will be very important. Any efforts for improvements to the monument should include Native American tribes in the area.

5.2 Feasible Transit Alternatives

Due to the fact that visitation in 1999 was down approximately 30 percent with just over 40,200 visitors compared to nearly 57,600 visitors in 1998, the BLM staff do not feel that the need for ATS exist, other than to develop a better trails system.

■ 6.0 Bibliography

Pompey's Pillar National Historic Landmark Visitor Center Program and Conceptual Design Alternatives, BLM, Billings, MT, August 1998.

Pompey's Pillar National Historic Landmark Interpretive Prospectus. BLM: July 1998.

Pompey's Pillar National Historic Landmark. Staff Report. *Development of Interpretive Aspects for Visitor Center at Pompey's Pillar*. Undated.

Pompey's Pillar Pompey's Pillar National Historic Landmark. *User Survey Results for the Period from June 1994 Through September 1994*.

■ 7.0 Persons Interviewed

Sandy Brooks, Superintendent, Pompey's Pillar National Historic Landmark, September 1, 1999

Billings, Montana Chamber of Commerce Representatives, September 2, 1999